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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

BIOGRAPHY

LIFE OF VOLTAIRE. By S. G. TALLENTYRE. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910.

THERE are books so full of delight, and delights so throbbing with life and the pageant of life, that one lays them down with a sudden sense of a relapse; a whole mirage world has subsided again into dust and ashes. Such a book as this is Mr. Tallentyre's "Voltaire," though one would not wish to claim any transcendent literary merit for it other than just this one of pulsating vitality. The illusion is perfect. For the time of reading we are in France in the eighteenth century moving with that gay, lithe, slim, buoyant bubble of humanity, Voltaire. If one wishes to detract from the author's achievement by saying that it would be impossible to write anything but a lively book upon so alive a theme, the reply is that Voltaire is in no wise so incontinently blithe in Carlyle's "Frederick the Great" or in his critical essays; nor yet is he so reasonable a thinker or consistent a character in the "Memoirs" of Madame d'Epinay or the reminiscences of Longchamp and Wagnière. Carlyle was egregiously unsuited to deal with Voltaire as a subject. With a mind of Gothic structure and a style of super-Teutonic pomposity, he refused to touch any theme until he had taken his readers "galumphing" through the Infinite and brought them up breathless and exhausted at the threshold of his subject. He devotes much of his space in the critical essay to pointing out that life to Voltaire "was not a mighty drama enacted in the theatre of Infinitude with suns for lamps and Eternity as a background," etc., etc. No, Voltaire was very much of his day and his country; keenly alive to the affairs of the moment. "Vif" he was always called by his friends and servants and "*volontaire*" he was dubbed in babyhood. He was quick and headstrong, with an incisive swiftness and neatness of speech which has no parallel in the history of human thought. Bernard Shaw approaches him but distantly in philosophic humor and tolerant cynicism; Whistler, an infinitely slighter figure, had but a tithe of his swiftness and neatness of mind. Could even a Whistler at nineteen have been ready with Voltaire's reply to the Regent Philip when released from the Bastille to which he had been committed for imprudent wit? The Regent warned the young offender to be prudent. "Be prudent," he said, "and I will provide for you." "I shall be delighted," said the audacious youth, "if you will give me my board, but pray take no further trouble as to my lodgings." Volumes could be made of his *mots*. Grimm tells of an Englishman who had been visiting Haller and then came to visit Voltaire; Voltaire said of the former host: "He is a great man, a great poet, a great naturalist, a great phi-

losopher," to which the Englishman replied: "What you say, sir, is the more admirable, because Mr. Haller does not admit the same of you." "Ah, well, we may both easily be mistaken," replied Voltaire.

Perhaps his retort to Rousseau's letter accusing him of pessimism and urging upon him the view that this is the best of all possible worlds and that what *is*, is right, is the only effective reply to an easy optimism. In a very short note M. de Voltaire mentions that the weather is exceedingly bad; that his niece, who is with him, is ill and her life despaired of; that he himself has been suffering continuously for some days. "I am waiting," he concludes, "until all this shall be past, when I shall be happy to agree with you."

Ridicule is destructive lightning to superstition and to sentimentality, and Voltaire was a god flashing forth lightning; no man has wielded it before or since with such adroitness, such killing skill. With a passion for liberty of thought and action, a keen sense of rectitude, a never-failing sympathy for the defeated and exploited, an inexhaustible fund of gayety and buoyancy, Voltaire was by turns imperious and cringing; bold to the point of foolhardiness and a coward; a fury and a ready pardoner; but never once did he turn aside really from the great warfare he led against the shackled mind. He lied readily and constantly. He denied his own works. He was no thunderer; he did not kill by thunderbolts. He was a skilful fencer, and his only weapons were adroitness and cunning.

"What is it they want me to say?" he exclaimed to Madame du Deffand when she and Madame du Châtelet were trying to restore him to ministerial favor. They thought a complete disavowal of his opinions advisable. "Very well!" He was complacent. "I will declare that Pascal was always right . . . that all priests are disinterested . . . that the Jesuits are honest . . . that the Inquisition is the triumph of humanity and tolerance: in fact, I will say anything they like if they will leave me in peace." Well might he promise this, for being left in peace meant the continuation of his warfare. No one would or could believe his disavowal, but they could pretend to do so, and he could be free for that utterance which was to light the torch of revolution.

Taking into account the easy morals of the day, Voltaire's relations to women were singularly exalted and pure. His connection with Madame du Châtelet was in great measure an intellectual friendship, as the comedy of its ending proves. His beneficence and patience with his nieces was proverbial, his kindness and generosity to his servants and to all those needing help was inexhaustible. Having summed up poverty in early life as being that which "most saps the courage," he set himself about winning an independence, and with his usual shrewdness and ability he accomplished the end in short order. Beginning with an income of 800 francs a year, he raised it, in time, to 80,000 francs by soliciting pensions and promotions, speculating in funds, trading with America and with Jew pawnbrokers. Vain all his life, keen for worldly honors and advancements, constantly punished and exiled, he finally returned to his native land to be killed by the glory he had yearned for. As Carlyle says: "He was drowned in a sea of applause."

Mr. Tallentyre has thrown aside all time-honored methods of biography and contented himself with sifting out of the many volumes of material a swift, terse, straightforward narrative. He gives no quotations, nor makes any particular acknowledgment of sources. For sheer readableness the

book is as enthralling as the liveliest fiction. This may be the reason it has already reached a third printing. It has in it, this "Life of Voltaire," the material of a dozen novels, a score of dramas and a century of poems.

LORD CHATHAM: HIS EARLY LIFE AND CONNECTIONS. By LORD ROSEBERY. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910.

Quite as much as the poet, the true biographer is born and not made. Above all else, he must have the sense of personality, and given this, a man can make the dulllest life of vital moment, while without it the life of the greatest genius may be so sterilized as to be worthless. Happy, then, is the public man who has Lord Rosebery for his biographer. Though the materials for an orthodox biography are all so meagre, nevertheless Lord Rosebery's "Chatham" is much more than a "torso," as the biographer modestly calls it. The biographer is himself so able, is so steeped in a knowledge of the times and of the men who made the times, has so unmistakably this rare sense of personality, that he has evoked a fairly distinct and very "questionable shape." The materials may be slight, yet the author has so skilfully used them as to make a constant appeal to the interest and imagination of the reader; and this "Early Life" has one of the most delightful qualities of either history or fiction—it is *suggestive*. Lord Rosebery has so charged his subject with his own fine sagacity that whatever is lacking of Pitt is made up for by Rosebery. Successfully to be the historian of either a single life or of an epoch a man must be born—in Scott's phrase—"a citizen of the world"; must have at every point the human touch, the human interest. To such an one men may be dull relatively, but never absolutely, and it is this lambent, flame-like interest in life, in men, that makes delightful these pages. Any man who could do justice to George II has accomplished an historical and intellectual feat and Lord Rosebery has achieved even this. Being an heir of the Whig traditions, Lord Rosebery's own political acumen and actual experience are ably seconded by an admirable temper and unusual wit and humor. His descriptive analysis, his vivid portrayal of individuals and groups—as of the Grenville Brothers, for instance—his penetrating comment and fine historic sense, would enliven and illumine any subject. Summing up his account of the Grenvilles, he says: "It is a singular story; there is nothing like it in the history of England; it resembles rather the persistent annals of the hive."

The turbulent Pitts, thriving apparently upon internal dissensions, with their touch of genius allied to insanity, are all memorable. Perhaps they seemed more intractable than they really were, since they did all their quarrelling in public, but even so they were a most irascible and incalculable race. Ann Pitt, with her unsheathed wit and sharp-edged mind, too clever and formidable for "human nature's daily food," born for society as William for public life, is quite as interesting as her famous brother. Their temperamental and intellectual likeness, the deep mutual love which evidently brightened and sweetened their early years, give a sense of tragedy to the estrangement—far greater on her part than on his—which followed. Love of this sister seems to have been the real affection of Chatham's life. For his marriage, whatever may have been the devotion of his wife, was evidently to him much more of an alliance than a union. "My brother, who has always seemed to guess and understand all I felt of every kind,"